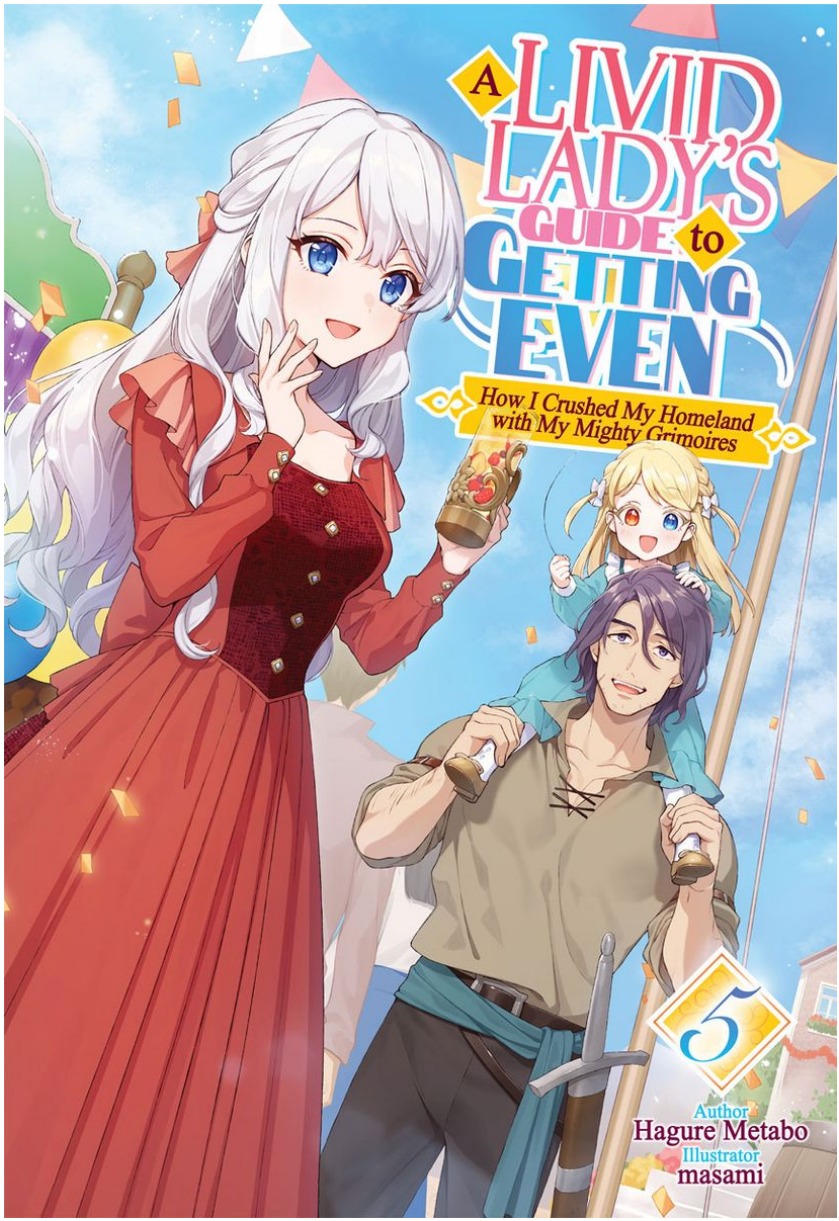
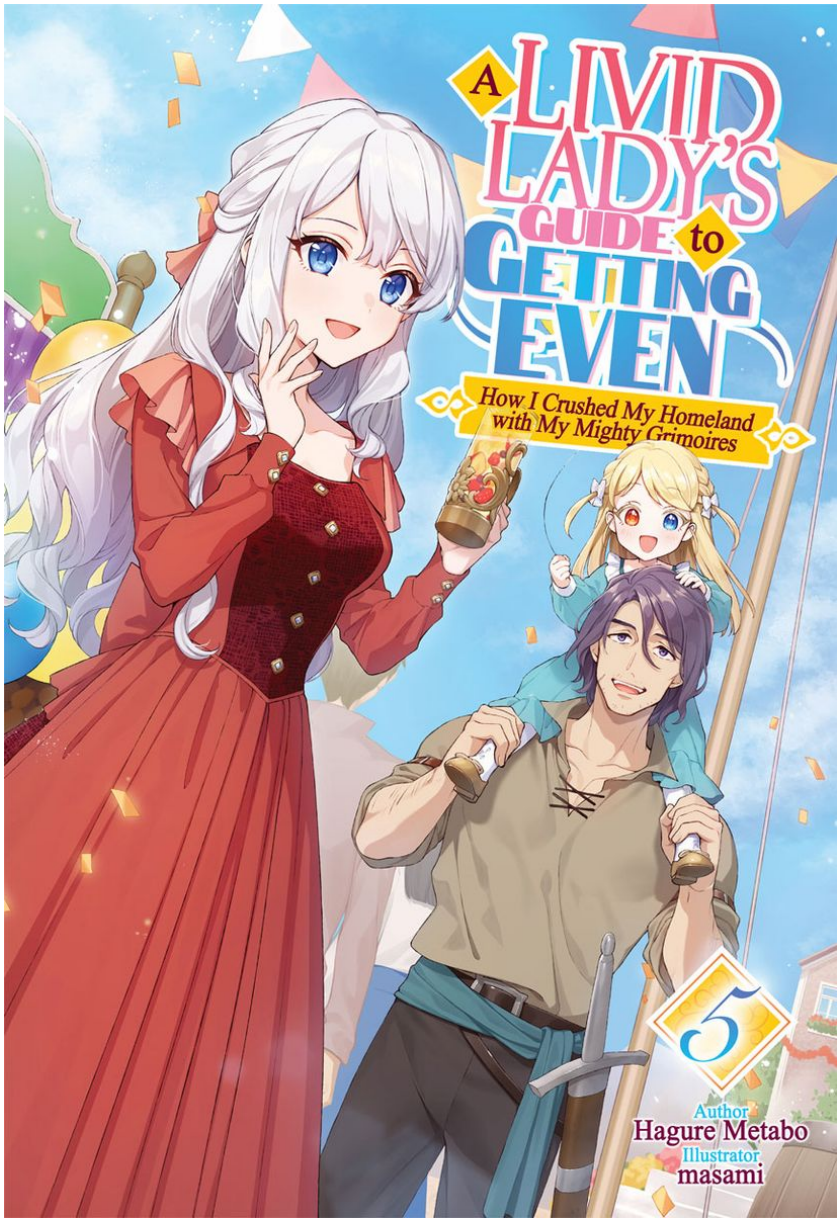

A LIVID LADY'S GUIDE to GETTING EVEN
How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires
5
Author
Hagure Metabo
Illustrator
masami

A Livid Lady's Guide to Getting Even: How I Crushed My Homeland with My Mighty Grimoires Volume 5 [Parts 1 to 2]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2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Prologue

The Yutear Empire was located in the north of the Central Continent. In the capital of this flourishing empire was a rich residential district, where the townhouses of lesser nobles and wealthy merchants stood side by side. I sat at my desk in one of these upscale residences, preparing for the coming festival. For most commoners, this was simply an event to enjoy. For us merchants, it was a crucial business opportunity. Needless to say, I didn't intend to let my firm be outdone.

I heard a knock on the door, which pulled me out of my focus. I said "Come in," and Lunoa entered my office, holding a stack of documents.

"Excuse me, Miss Ellie," she said. "A shipment just arrived from Gana."

"I'll check the goods later," I replied. "You can leave the delivery slip on my desk."

"Here it is."

The village of Gana served as Traitre's production base. Before heading to the United Beast Kingdom, I'd written to them and asked them to send us a very specific shipment.

"The goods we received this time are different than usual, aren't they?" Lunoa asked.

"They are, indeed. I asked them to lower the quality somewhat so we can price this batch cheaper."

"Oh, so we'll commercialize the products under Enfer."

The Enfer Commercial Firm was a brand new company I planned to launch right in time for the festival. Unlike Traitre, which sold high-quality products targeted at nobles, Enfer would deal with less expensive, lower-quality products. They'd be cheap enough for

commoners to be able to purchase them, and in addition to cosmetics, I planned to sell clothes and accessories.

“Up until now, I haven’t sold products targeted at commoners out of consideration for existing firms. But now that roughly sixty percent of the capital’s luxury cosmetics brands are affiliated with me in one way or another, the time has come to move on to wealthy commoners.”

Lunoa put down the stack of documents she’d brought, and I swiftly signed the papers that needed to be returned to the Merchants’ Guild before giving them back to her.

Misha, who was sitting at the desk next to mine, started sorting the rest of the documents.

“But, Miss Ellie,” Misha asked, “Why bother creating a new firm? Wouldn’t it have been much easier to create a new division under Traitre for this new line? You’d pay less in taxes too.”

“Good question,” I said. “Do you know the answer, Lunoa?”

Lunoa remained silent for a few moments, thinking. Eventually, she replied, “Well… I’d say your goal was to protect Traitre’s brand image. Traitre’s clients are mostly nobles, and we even have a membership system in place. If Traitre started catering to commoners with inexpensive products, it would lose its prestige and, by extension, its appeal.”

“That is the main reason, indeed,” I confirmed. “There is no shortage of nobles who care more about the scarcity and prestige of a product than its quality. Purchasing from the same brand as commoners wouldn’t sit well with them.”

“The main reason? Does that mean there is another?”

“The second is risk diversification. As I mentioned previously, Enfer will not only sell cosmetics, but also clothes, accessories, and perhaps other things in the future. Besides, instead of manufacturing them all in-house like we do for Traitre, I intend to stock goods from other companies—imports specifically. Under

these conditions, it will be difficult to prepare for unforeseen trouble. I need to protect Traitre in the event that Enfer goes under."

"So while you'll be in control of both businesses, the two will remain entirely separate entities to prevent joint bankruptcy..." Lunoa said.

"I must confess to one more ulterior motive. Paying more taxes will please the empire. Giving a good impression is a nice bonus, don't you think?" I jested.

Lunoa and Misha laughed.

"Hmm? Isn't the transit fee higher than usual?" Misha suddenly asked, looking puzzled as she stared at one of the documents.

She handed it to me and I quickly read through it. She was right; the transit fee had gone up.

"Good catch, Misha," I said. "Go ask the person in charge of transit to provide an itemized list of expenses. I want to know how much was spent at each stage."

"Understood, miss," she replied, trotting out of the room. She came back soon after with a list of the tolls exacted by each lord whose territory our goods had gone through. According to the document, one territory had dramatically increased its toll compared to before.

"Baron Dirk increased his toll," I noted.

"Baron Dirk, huh?" Lunoa repeated, a bitter expression on her face.

When we'd first traveled to the capital together, we had been attacked by brigands while passing through Baron Dirk's territory. It seemed that the memory of that arrow flying toward her hadn't faded.

"Wait a minute. Isn't he targeting Traitre specifically with this toll hike?" Lunoa asked.

“What do you mean?” Misha said. “I thought lords couldn’t set different tolls for different companies.”

“They can’t do that arbitrarily, but they can set individual tolls based on the type of item transiting through their land, or the size of the firm,” Lunoa explained.

I nodded. “Lunoa is right. As per the laws of the empire, noblemen are allowed to set specific tolls depending on the scale of companies and the products they purvey.”

“Baron Dirk only increased his toll for large companies handling cosmetic products and raw materials used to manufacture cosmetics. Most big firms dealing with cosmetics in Lebrick Magravate are under Traitre. As a result, most of the cosmetics shipped from there to the capital through Dirk Barony are affiliated with Traitre. In other words, he is targeting us,” Lunoa concluded.

“Should we send a letter of protest to the baron?” Misha asked.

“That will prove difficult. While the price he set is high, charging a toll is perfectly within his rights as a feudal lord.”

“Should we send our products through an alternate shipping route, then?”

“Hmm… Avoiding Dirk Barony would force the goods to make too long of a detour. We’d need to run the numbers properly to be entirely certain, but I believe we’re better off paying the baron.”

“I see… I’ll check, just in case. Perhaps there is a cheaper route we can exploit,” Lunoa said.

“Sure, please do that.”

Finding a less expensive route would be difficult—if at all possible, but I didn’t want to discourage Lunoa when she was being so proactive. Even if she couldn’t make it work, this would teach her about opening new trade routes.

“Let’s take a break for now. Misha, could you please make us some tea?”

“Of course, miss,” she answered. She put the documents she’d organized in the drawer of her desk and stood up. There was a water supply in the office, so we were able to brew tea here.

“Once we’re done with these extra procedures, we’ll be back to our normal workflow,” I said. “I don’t expect there’ll be much to do from tomorrow onward, so the two of you may head into town if you’d like. The most restless merchants have already started opening street stalls, and others are having sales.”

“We planned to go with Alice and Lily,” Lunoa told me.

“Lily? Oh, the girl who works for Yuu.”

“Yes.”

Lily was the disciple of one of my friends, Yuu. Nowadays, Lunoa often undertook assignments as an adventurer on her days off, and she’d become a regular at Yuu’s shop, where she frequently bought potions from Lily.

I’d just finished clearing off my desk when Misha approached, holding a tray of teacups. I took one and had a sip. Misha had gotten a lot better at brewing tea. She’d chosen the right water temperature for steeping the tea leaves, and the fragrance of the black tea enchanted my senses. I mostly drank coffee these days, but I still very much enjoyed the occasional cup of tea.

“Speaking of the festival…” Misha started, “What events will be going on?”

“On the first day, the imperial family will parade across the city. Then, they’ll head back to the palace, where His Majesty the Emperor will give a speech from the balcony to open the festivities. Part of the imperial garden will be opened to the public, so the people can witness it. After that, the nobility will busy themselves with parties and ceremonies, while the commoners—and the travelers who come to the empire especially for this occasion—will enjoy the booths and stalls the merchants put up. Similar events, on a smaller scale, of course, will also take place simultaneously in other cities of the empire.”

Travelers from all over the world flocked to the empire for this festival, which took place every five years. I wasn't in the empire the last time it had been held, so I'd yet to see it in person, but the festival was incredibly famous. I expected the capital to be bustling with activity until it ended.

"Come to think of it, I have a feeling they also held festivities in Lord Lebrick's territory..." Lunoa mused.

"I don't really remember it, but that might be because we were traveling so much back then," Misha said.

Considering their age, Lunoa and Misha would have been roughly five years old at the time of the previous festival. It was only natural for them not to remember much about it.

"What are we even celebrating?" Misha added.

"Oh my! You don't know?" I asked, surprised.

"No. I don't think my parents ever mentioned it," she replied.

"I suppose it makes sense," I said. "If I'm not mistaken, catkin tribes originally lived north of the empire. They accepted vassalization fairly quickly, without any wars, when the empire started expanding, but your people weren't originally part of it. This event finds its roots in the festivities that commemorated the founding of the old Yutear Kingdom, so tribes without direct lineage to it or its neighboring regions tend to feel less connected to the celebrations. These days, though, people have started holding the festival all over the empire."

"I see!"

"I didn't know much about it either," Lunoa said. "I only knew that it had to do with the founding of the nation."

Lunoa's understanding of it seemed about right. I figured most people only knew that much.

"All right, girls," I said. We shall leave the work to others for once, and enjoy the festival."

“Yay!”

Chapter 1: Before the Festival

"There you go, Alice," I said, hanging a small leather pouch around her neck. It contained two small silver coins and around ten copper coins.

"Make sure to stay with Lunoa and Misha the entire time, all right?"

"Okay!"

Alice was about to head out with Lunoa and Misha to browse through the stalls and watch street performances. I wished I could go with them, but I had a prior commitment I needed to honor. I eased my worries by reminding myself that we were in the very heart of the empire—the safest place there was. Plus, there were even more guards patrolling than usual because of the festivities. The girls wouldn't be kidnapped again, especially since I'd requested for some of Barl's men to keep an eye on them from afar.

Don't worry, your preparations are flawless, I reassured myself deep down.

"Miss Ellie, the carriage is ready," Mireille told me.

"Thank you."

I watched Alice and the others walk away before heading toward the carriage with Mireille. It was an unassuming, yet high-quality carriage. The materials were as fine as could be, befitting the head of a large firm, but there were no ornaments whatsoever decorating it, which helped me avoid angering nobles who hated to see mere commoners own luxurious things.

Barl was petting the mane of one of the horses, and he turned toward us as we approached.

"Oh, hey, missy. Have the kids gone out already?"

"They have," I answered. "I hope they'll enjoy the festival."

Mireille and I boarded the carriage. Barl closed the door for us before hopping onto the driver's seat and grabbing the reins. He cracked his whip once, and the carriage started moving forward. As we passed through the gate, I immediately noticed that the atmosphere in the streets was different than usual.

"Everyone seems to be elated," Mireille commented.

"They must have been looking forward to the festival," I answered.

"I hope you get to enjoy it too, miss," she told me.

"Me too. I always used to be busy hosting important guests during such celebrations... While there was still much to prepare now as a merchant, I can leave most things to my staff once the festival starts." I paused. "Exploring the festival with Alice sounds fun."

Mireille and I kept chatting as the carriage headed toward the noble district. The person I was going to see today was a member of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council, and the grand master of the Merchants' Guild—Count Albert Guide, the Seer.

"Count Guide got in touch with you first this time, didn't he?" Mireille asked.

"He contacted me on behalf of his son. The count has built tremendous wealth by using the harbor in his territory to control exports and imports. His heir has made it his goal not to stop at international trade, but also to handle the logistics and shipping of goods within the empire."

"So that's why they reached out to you."

"Indeed. On paper, the count's son's idea is excellent, but if he tries to make it a reality without the proper know-how, there is no doubt he'll fail. That is why he proposed a partnership with Enfer. I assume he's mostly trying to accumulate experience before he moves on to bigger things."

I shrugged and continued, "I realize that putting it like that

makes it sound like he just intends to use us, but this partnership would be extremely profitable to us too. A business connection with the count is priceless. Think about it: the Seer himself will be in our debt."

If I played my cards right, this connection could help me expand my business to other continents. I already had a friendly relationship with Count Hammitt, who also owned a port, but due to the geographical position of his territory, he mostly conducted business with other ports on the Central Continent. There were some exchanges with other continents—in fact, I'd already imported aqua crawlers from the Southern Continent through his port—but they were fairly rare. Count Guide, on the other hand, *specialized* in intercontinental trade.

"As you can see, these dealings will play a big role in our future, far beyond immediate profit," I declared.

**

While Ellie was on her way to Count Guide's townhouse, Alice walked toward the main square, holding hands with Lunoa on one side and Misha on the other. The square was near the noble district, and plenty of lesser nobles, knights, and prosperous merchants had taken up residence in the area. With the festival coming up in a few days, security was tight, and any quarrel—even if it didn't come to blows—was broken up or mediated by guards almost immediately.

Usually, the main square was a place of relaxation for the people of the capital, with a quiet and serene atmosphere. Today, however, a cacophony of merchants' voices advertising their wares filled the air. Countless peddlers and itinerant entertainers had traveled to the capital for the festival. It was risky to plan to arrive on the first day of the festival due to the influx of people, so most of them had come to the city well in advance and used that time to set up their businesses early. It happened without fail every single time the festival was held, and the authorities had long since gotten used to it. They prepared in advance so the merchants' early arrival would not cause chaos.

"The square is packed," Lunoa said.

“It is,” Misha agreed. “Don’t let go of our hands, Miss Alice, okay?”

“I won’t!”

The three girls went straight to the large decorative fountain and waited there. Barely any time had passed before another young girl ran up to them.

“Sorry for the wait!” Lily exclaimed, waving.

“Where should we go first?” Misha asked.

“A lot of entertainers have gathered near the center of the square! How about we check out their shows first, then stroll through the stalls and do some shopping?” Lily suggested.

“That sounds like a good plan,” Lunoa replied.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Alice yelled, grabbing Lunoa and Lily’s hands and dashing forward, pulling them along.

“Miss Alice! No running!” Misha warned, running after them. “You’ll hurt yourself!”

At the very center of the square stood a bronze statue of the first emperor. Around it, wandering minstrels played music while other entertainers showcased their talents.

“They’re a lot better than the people we saw in Kellevan,” Misha commented.

“They are!” Lunoa said. “Oh, look! A monster! Is that man a tamer?”

“Big sisters! Look! Look there!” Alice chirped, pointing.

Misha and Lunoa turned around to follow her gaze and saw a large rainbow in the sky. A juggler in vibrant clothes was in the air, walking on the rainbow itself.

“How is he doing that?” Misha asked.

“Magic?” Alice said.

“Most likely, yes,” Lunoa said. “I assume he’s using some sort of illusion spell to conceal tiny footholds.”

When the juggler finished crossing the rainbow bridge, it shattered into small particles of light and poured down upon the onlookers like glittering, prismatic rain.

“What sophisticated magic! This must be the work of several people teaming up,” Lily said.

After that, the girls watched a tamer with a whip who made a monster jump through hoops of fire, a man who swallowed a sword, a woman who changed clothes again and again in a split second, and many more performances. After a while, they moved away from the center of the square to take a look at the stalls.

“Is there anything you’d like to buy, Miss Alice?” Misha asked.

“I wanna buy a gift for mama!”

“That’s so thoughtful of you,” Misha praised.

“Let’s go see if we can find something,” Lunoa said.

“I think I saw some nice stalls selling miscellaneous goods over there,” Lily said.

As they followed her, they passed many booths selling various kinds of products. To set up shop here, in the main square, vendors had to be approved by the authorities first. They were then grouped with other peddlers who sold similar items, and allocated a space. That way, buyers could find what they were looking for more easily.

The group was meandering along, looking at the goods on sale, when Misha suddenly exclaimed, “Ah!”

“What’s wrong, Misha?”

“Nothing, sorry... I just saw something that caught my attention,” she replied, standing still in front of a stall.

The others approached and saw she was looking at a dagger.

“That’s not a design you see often,” Lily commented.

“This dagger...” Misha whispered.

“That dagger seems to be of pretty good quality,” Lunoa said, after she took a good look at the item that had grabbed Misha’s interest.

“Is that so?” Misha replied.

“I couldn’t analyze it as well as I’d hoped, but the base materials it’s made of are good,” Lunoa said.

“Excuse me. Could you tell me about this dagger?” Misha asked the peddler.

“Hm? Ah, this one? Well, it was excavated from ancient ruins. I got it when I purchased the unsold inventory from a merchant friend of mine, so I don’t really know much more about it.”

“Oh, I see,” Misha said, disappointed.

“The ornaments on it are so peculiar,” Lunoa noted.

“They must be from a monster’s corpse,” Lily said. “I couldn’t say

which type, though."

"The dagger must be valuable since it was found in ruins," Misha suggested.

"I don't think so. It's too neat and undamaged. It's got to be a replica," Lily said.

"I agree. It doesn't look like it could have been found in ruins," Lunoa added.

"So, are you going to buy it or not?" the peddler asked.

"It's your call, Misha," Lunoa said, turning toward her.

"I'm not sure. How much is it?" she asked the vendor.

"Two regular silvers and a small silver."

Lunoa noticed Misha's hesitation, and started negotiating.

"For a replica? It can't possibly be worth more than a regular silver and three small silvers," she said.

"Whoa, I'm gonna have to stop you right there, missy. I can't possibly go that low. I could do two regular silver coins, though."

"How about we meet in the middle, mister? One regular silver coin and four small silvers."

The peddler laughed. "You sure drive a hard bargain, missy! I'll fold for one silver coin and nine small silvers."

"All right," she said, before turning to Misha. "It doesn't look like we'll get a better offer than that. Does that work for you?" Lunoa could tell the peddler wouldn't budge this time.

"Y-Yes. Thank you," Misha said.

"You even know when to quit," the seller said with a smile, impressed by Lunoa's negotiating skills.

He took the money from Misha and handed her the dagger.

Then, the group bid him farewell and continued shopping. Eventually, Alice stopped in front of a stall that sold accessories.

“Have you found something that you like, Miss Alice?” Misha asked.

“Yeah! Which one would suit mama best?”

“You should pick, Alice,” Lunoa said. “Choose the one *you* think would suit her best.”

Alice gazed wide-eyed at the rows of accessories with a serious expression.

“That one!” she eventually exclaimed.

“It’s beautiful,” Misha said.

“I think you picked well,” Lily said. “It truly fits Miss Ellie’s image.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it,” Lunoa added.

**

Count Guide’s residence was almost on the edge of the noble district. People of his peerage and position normally lived closer to the imperial palace, but Count Guide himself had decided on this location. As the grand master of the empire’s Merchants’ Guild, he wanted to be closer to the guild’s building.

“So that is Count Guide’s townhouse,” I said.

It was a modern residence built of white stone. After we showed the letter Albert had sent us to the gatekeeper, we were shown inside. The first thing I noticed was the width of the corridors and doors. They were all a little wider than those in most mansions to accommodate the wings of the Guide family, who were a house of dragonewts. Many of their servants were dragonewts too, and I couldn’t help but wonder if they were related to the main family. The maid who guided us through the house, for instance, had a beautiful pair of wings on her back. She led us to a room where

Albert and his son Edward were waiting for us.

“We’ve been expecting you, Miss Ellie,” said Edward. He was a young man who appeared to be roughly the same age as me.

Edward smiled and extended his hand to me. I was taken aback for a second and my eyes widened in surprise, but I returned his smile and shook his hand.

According to what I’d heard from Albert, after graduating from the imperial academy, Edward had returned to the family’s estate to study business for a few years. This was his first time conducting negotiations, and from what I understood, his father was only joining us to observe. He would not comment on anything.

I glanced at Albert when Edward wasn’t looking. He gave me a strained smile but said nothing, despite the fact that Edward had broken several social protocols. I imagined Edward was conducting the meeting this way because he knew my true identity, but I was a commoner merchant as far as anyone in the empire was concerned. A noble waiting for a commoner ahead of time was unthinkable. Besides, while Edward would be handling the negotiations, Albert had been the one to formally invite me. Edward and I had never met before, so it wasn’t proper to greet one another before Albert introduced us. That was why I’d smiled and shook his hand without responding verbally.

I turned to Albert and bowed deeply.

“It’s been a while, Miss Ellie,” he said.

“It has indeed, my lord.”

“Have you been well?”

“My business has fared wonderfully, thanks to you.”

“I’m glad to hear it. If you don’t mind, I shall leave today’s talks to my son, Edward.” Albert stood up and put a hand on his son’s shoulder. “As you can see, he’s still young and inexperienced, but there is no need for you to go easy on him.”

Now that Albert had introduced him to me, I could finally speak directly to Edward.

“I’m Ellie Leis, the chair of the Traitre Commercial Firm. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“O-Oh, sorry,” he replied, his face paling. “Likewise. I’m Edward Guide.

Our reaction seemed to have clued him in on his mistakes. However, acting so meek in front of a merchant was also a bad move. I had no doubt his father would lecture him after I left.

“As you may have heard,” Edward started, “I am thinking of implementing a comprehensive plan to transport and sell the products sourced by our house. Traitre controls the market for cosmetics, and I believe a business partnership between the two of us could be mutually advantageous. That is why I requested this meeting.”

“I see. Well, first of all, would you be so kind as to show me the plan you’ve drafted for this partnership?”

“Of course, here it is.”

I looked over the document Edward had just handed me. He had dutifully calculated the transportation expenses, administrative fees, storage costs, and more. While he still had much to learn regarding etiquette, Edward seemed to be a competent man.

“In other words, you’d be providing the resources, and we’d be offering you our expertise,” I said, after reading through it all.

“Exactly. I know Traitre uses scarce materials that must be sourced from other continents. A partnership with me would certainly benefit you in that regard too,” Edward said.

“Still, I must admit that something bothers me,” I said. “Once you’re done absorbing our know-how, what incentive will you have to keep working with Traitre?”

“I-I could never betray someone who has done me a favor! Please

take my word for it!”

“I assure you, Lord Edward, that I have faith in your good character and do not think you’d dishonor yourself in such a way. However, you must understand that many depend on my firm to feed their families. I cannot leave their fate to my personal evaluation of your character, even if you’re the son of a respected nobleman of the empire.”

I gave the proposal back to Edward. While he was Count Guide’s heir, Edward did not have a title at the moment. His word did not carry enough weight for me to rely solely on it.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I cannot accept your terms,” I concluded.

“W-Wait!” Edward said, panicking. “How about we sign a magic contract, then?”

“A magic contract only binds the individuals who signed it. If something happens to either of us, Traitre will have no way to protect its interests. I am not willing to take that risk.”

“In that case, in addition to signing a magic contract, I shall offer you the titles for five of our ships.”

“Offer me the titles?”

“Indeed,” Edward confirmed. “I understand that it will take time to let trust grow between us. Hence this proposal: Our house currently operates 153 ships. I will transfer ownership of five of them to you. Since they’ll become your assets, your successor will inherit them when you pass. Naturally, we will compensate you appropriately to keep using these ships.”

“Interesting,” I said.

Edward wrote down the expected fee his firm would pay me to rent each of the ships I would own.

“How much will the maintenance of the ships and personnel cost us?” I asked.

“We will be operating the ships and covering these fees as per usual, so you needn’t worry about any of that. In exchange, we shall sign an additional contract stipulating that these ships may only be rented to us, and will not be used for any other purpose.”

Edward had piqued my interest. We’d both be conceding guarantees until we could fully trust one another. He’d give me five ships, but I wouldn’t be able to use them myself, as he’d retain control over them. To be honest, I didn’t necessarily mind that. This way, I could secure a steady revenue stream without needing to worry about operating the ships.

“That’s not a bad deal,” I said.

“You agree, then?!”

“Ten ships,” I stated.

“Huh?”

“I’ll enter this partnership for ten ships.”

Edward seemed to be at a loss. Just as I expected, he was the type to carefully run the numbers before making any decisions. He could tell from instinct that giving me ten ships would tilt the balance in my favor far too much, and I could see the gears turning in his head, trying to calculate on the spot where the line stood. All these calculations delayed his answer and betrayed his thoughts.

“How about six ships?” he finally offered.

“That isn’t enough,” I replied. “Eight would be the bare minimum.”

“Seven, then? I’m afraid I cannot promise you any more on my own accord.”

“In that case...how about we go back to five ships, but you agree to let me have a say in their cargo, as well as give me 0.05% of the profits you make off of them? In exchange, I’ll rent you the stores I’ve secured for Enfer at 70% of their market value. That way, if you were to withdraw for any reason, you wouldn’t need to deal

with unnecessary real estate assets. On the other hand, if your business grows without any issues, I'll sell them to you."

"So you're proposing to mitigate my risks in exchange, huh?" Edward said. "Fine. However, while I promise to listen to your opinion and take it into account, we will retain the right to make the final decision regarding the ships' cargo. If you allow me to add this clause to the contract, I'll accept your terms."

"I agree," I said. "Would you like me to prepare the magic contract?"

"No need; I shall take care of it. Please excuse me while I go make arrangements."

Edward stood up and left the room. Albert, who'd been sitting quietly in a corner, let out an awkward laugh.

"You sure were merciless," he said.

"Well, *you* told me not to go easy on him, my lord," I replied, with an innocent smile.

I'd made it sound like I was ready to make concessions too, but renting out buildings I already owned was not a sacrifice by any means—in fact, I'd simply secure more revenue. On the other hand, snatching 0.05% of the ships' profits, along with a right to give my opinion on their cargo, was huge.

"So, what did you think of my son?" Albert asked.

"Let me see... First of all, he lacks experience handling commoners as a nobleman. He's bright—that much is clear—but if I may, I suggest he leave the negotiations to someone else. However, his ability to draft plans and manage businesses shines through. The proposal he made to me is quite similar to a novel idea that has emerged on the Northern Continent in recent years. They call it 'shares.'"

"I've heard of it. You're referring to that new practice of allowing outsiders to have a say in business decisions, and paying them dividends in exchange for having them bear part of the operating

costs.”

“Yes. I don’t know if your son heard about it or came up with the idea himself, but being ready to implement such novel and interesting concepts into negotiations is wonderful.”

Albert looked satisfied by my praise. “I’m sure this experience taught him a lot,” he said. “I’m sorry for making you go through this.”

“Oh, please don’t be. I’ve profited quite a lot from these talks.”

After that, Albert and I chatted casually while waiting. Eventually, Edward came back with several parchments.

“I’m sorry for the wait,” he said, handing me a blank magic contract.

“What a fine magic contract,” I said, after I studied the magic circle on it.

“It is of the highest quality,” Edward told me. “I brought out the best we had on hand.”

It was indeed the best—and most powerful—type of magic contract used between merchants. Better ones existed, but they were usually reserved for monumental deals that involved noblemen or royalty—treaties that bound two nations together, for instance.

“Allow me to draw up the contract, then,” he said.

Edward started writing down everything we’d talked about in detail.

“Lord Edward,” I said, stopping him. “I suggest you modify the way you’ve worded this clause. It could be taken differently.”

“U-Understood.”

Magic contracts were a little tricky in that adding too many details wasn’t always the best course of action. The more specifics

one added, the more one risked writing in contradictions or flawed sentences. Sometimes, such things allowed one party to unilaterally disregard their obligations.

While Edward wrote, I sometimes made corrections and instructed him on the best way to handle magic contracts. That was the least I could do—especially since I worded some things in ways that benefited me. Albert's stiff smile was back on his lips, but he didn't interrupt.

"Are we in agreement with the content of this contract?"

"We are, indeed. I don't see any issues with it."

Count Guide's chamberlain brought us a dagger, and Edward and I took turns to prick one of our fingertips and sign the contract with our blood. I wrote Ellie Leis, but that wouldn't matter or change anything.

Once we were done, we both healed the tips of our fingers with a potion the chamberlain had brought alongside the dagger, and we put our hands over our respective signatures. All that was left was to infuse some mana into the contract. As we did so, the letters rose from the page, and after floating in midair for a moment, they were sucked into our bodies.

"The contract is now in effect," Edward said.

He looked relieved as he handed me a copy of the contract. I checked it over once more, and put it away in my bag.

"All right. I shall now excuse myself," I said. "I thank you for this fruitful transaction, my lord."

"You have my thanks too, Miss Ellie."

Edward and I shook hands once more, and I left Count Guide's residence.

**

“This is strange,” Bulat whispered as he sat in his office in the royal palace of Haldoria. He had just read through the last report his aide had brought him. Since Sieg was in the United Beast Kingdom, his usual work had been divided between several people, including Bulat himself. As he organized the documents he’d finished reading, Bulat looked up at his aide.

“Still no word from Sieg?”

“None at all, Your Majesty,” his aide answered. “We sent a messenger as soon as the prime minister’s periodic reports stopped coming in, but the United Beast Kingdom is still in turmoil in the wake of that stampede right near the capital. His Majesty King Leon hasn’t been able to tell us anything about his whereabouts either.”

“I see. I don’t think Leon would betray me, and Sieg isn’t so weak or careless that he’d get hurt during a stampede. Something else must have happened. Perhaps he ran into trouble and is unable to contact us. Keep looking for him.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

Bulat had continued working even as they spoke. He finished drafting a land readjustment plan and handed it to his aide. While most people only thought of Bulat as a warrior king, he did perform his fair share of administrative work. He wasn’t born brilliant, but he’d received a strict education befitting a king and could complete most tasks at a satisfactory level. With both Elizabeth, who’d long helped with his duties, and Sieg, his trusted prime minister, gone, he had no choice but to rise to the occasion. What was truly peculiar, on the other hand, was his son’s utter ineptitude despite having been taught by the best teachers for years. And yet...

“Is this all true?” Bulat asked, pointing at the paper he was reading.

“Yes, Your Majesty. It is.”

The document in question was a report on the different tasks Friede had undertaken in recent weeks. After the many blunders

he'd committed, Friede had been forced away from most government affairs for a time. Given the current dire lack of personnel, though, it was unthinkable to allow someone who'd received a good education to idle his days away. Adel had thus decided to give him some tasks of relatively little importance. The surprising thing was that Friede had completed them all flawlessly. Several people had checked his work, and they all agreed: it was perfect. That puzzled Bulat more than any other potential result. After thinking about it for a moment, he reached a happy conclusion.

Bulat let out a relieved sigh. "He's finally started to understand his role."

"What do you mean, Your Majesty?"

"Calling Adel back and removing Friede from his position has opened his eyes. He just needed this push to change his mindset. He always had the ability to deliver results."

"Do you truly think so?"

"I'm sure of it! He could have done it from the start if he'd tried, but he was too lazy and neglected his duties. It's far too late for this sudden change of heart, however. I have already decided to entrust the real authority to Adel. However, I wouldn't be against awarding Friede a suitable position if he continues to prove himself."

The king's aide concealed his exasperation as well as he could and left Bulat's office after gathering some documents.

"This is strange," Adel whispered as she sat in her office in the royal palace of Haldoria.

She had just read through a report on the recent political upheaval in the Nile Kingdom, one of Haldoria's vassals.

"These troubles originally stemmed from the succession war between the first and second princes. The king met his demise without having officially named an heir, and the second prince

wasted no time before murdering his older brother."

"And occupying the royal palace while he was at it," Maoran pointed out. She looked fed up, but the blame wasn't entirely on the Nile Kingdom.

"Part of the responsibility lies with us," Adel said. "When succession conflicts like this one arise, the suzerain must step in and act as a middleman between the two parties in its vassal state. However, we were so preoccupied with the mountain of problems that we currently have that we didn't react in time."

Adel let out a deep, pained sigh. "Instead, the third prince executed the second prince and resolved the coup in less than three days. He also purged the nobles that took his brother's side," Adel stated.

"Will that third prince be the next king, then?"

"Well, the thing is that the third prince renounced his right to the throne in the past. But now that there is no one left except him, the noble council of the Nile Kingdom wrote to us and requested that we restore his right of succession."

"So that's what the letter you read earlier said," Maoran replied. She picked up the letter from Adel's desk and added, "It's addressed to His Highness Prince Friede."

"Handling the vassal states is supposed to be the crown prince's job," Adel answered. "That's why they wrote to him."

"And you're telling me that His Highness wrote this petition to you himself?" Maoran asked.

"He did... Isn't it oddly eerie? The structure, the attachments... Everything is the way it should be. I wouldn't have been surprised if a civil official had given it to me, but... How should I put this? The work isn't groundbreaking in any way, shape or form, but there are no issues with this petition—not even one! Just the thought that my brother wrote it somehow gives me goosebumps."

"Don't you think it's likely that he made one of his subordinates

write it?"

"That would certainly explain it. I suppose Father probably thinks he's finally becoming aware of his position as a member of the royal family, but I can't help but feel like something is off. Not to mention the fact that there's this other issue."

Adel reached for the report she'd received from Roselia and Eiwass. On their way to the imperial capital, they'd discovered the body of Sieg Leiston and had buried it. According to them, Elizabeth was the likely culprit.

"Do you think Lady Elizabeth is behind His Highness's sudden change?" Maoran asked.

"That's not impossible, but I believe another force may be at play."

"Another force? But who?"

"I don't know. I just have a gut feeling."

"I see..." Maoran paused before asking, "What should we do regarding Roselia and Eiwass's report? Do we tell His Majesty?"

"No, definitely not. We'll have a much easier time making our move without a prime minister in place. I feel bad for Sieg, but he will have to remain 'missing' for a while longer."

"Understood. I don't know if we'll get any results, but I'll have people look into His Highness."

Adel nodded, then dropped the documents in her hand onto her desk and stared up at the ceiling. Right at that moment, someone knocked on the door. Adel straightened her posture, then asked Maoran to open the door. A civil official carrying a pile of papers entered and bowed to Adel. He handed her the files and told her what he'd heard in the king's office earlier.

"Seriously? How stupidly fond of his son can he be?" she said with a sigh. Their father's reaction to Friede's strange behavior was even worse than she'd anticipated.

“Isn’t it obvious that an idiot like Friede couldn’t have become an outstanding, responsible prince out of nowhere? Father’s first thought should have been that someone was backing him. And what does he even mean by a ‘suitable position?’ Friede has caused so much strife between us and the empire! The only use he still has is becoming the perfect scapegoat on whom to pin everything that’s wrong with this kingdom before I get rid of him for good.”

“I’m afraid His Majesty the King cannot see things that way. He’s always been very fond of the prince since he shares his affinity for thunder magic…” the king’s aide said.

“As they say, the more foolish the child, the cuter they appear,” Adel said.

“Where does that come from?”

“It’s a saying from the Southern Continent,” Adel told him.

“I see. An interesting expression, indeed.”

“Anyway, that’s all for today. Go back to the king and continue to monitor him for me.”

“As you command, Your Highness,” the king’s aide replied.

The man bowed and left her office. He was a civil official who came from a branch of the royal family who had served as royal aides for generations. Ever since he was a young man, he’d tirelessly advised Bulat with Sieg. However, his allegiance did not lie with Bulat himself—what he truly served was the Kingdom of Haldoria. He had been worried about the nation’s future before Adel invited him to join her cause. Needless to say, he’d accepted. In the shadows, Adel continued to bring capable noblemen and officials to her side as she grew her influence.

Adel’s attention strayed to the pile of documents the civil official had delivered. She brought her hand to her forehead, trying to rub away a wrinkle that had started forming between her eyebrows from too much frowning.

“Friede was a thorn in my side when he didn’t do his work, but I

never thought that him actually doing it would cause me even more trouble."

A gust of wind blew in through the open window. It scattered the papers on Adel's desk and disheveled her hair. Adel massaged her furrowing brow even harder.

**

A man wearing a luxurious outfit made of brightly colored fabrics stretched his stiff muscles. He watched as a civil official scrambled to gather a pile of documents the wind had just blown away.

"It's so hot today too," he said, looking out the window. A heat haze distorted the scenery with a rippling effect. He wasn't expecting an answer, but the overly serious civil official replied anyway.

"Isn't that always the case? Although the temperature is far more bearable inside thanks to the magic items blocking the heat."

"True. And it just might become even *more* bearable in the near future."

The man took out a piece of vibrant fabric from his pocket and tossed it to the civil official.

"Is that...aqua silk?!"

"Exactly. A firm in the empire succeeded in recreating it. It won't be long before we can easily obtain it in our country too."

"That's wonderful, Your Majesty!"

"Don't call me that just yet. Speaking of which, have we finally received a reply from Haldoria?"

"We have yet to receive an official notice. According to our envoy, the process is underway and we're very likely to receive a positive response. There are many rumors about His Highness the Crown Prince, so I admit I was anxious, but it appears my worries

were unfounded and... Hey! Why are you getting changed in the middle of our conversation?!"

"Well, I'm done with my work, aren't I?"

"How could you possibly be done? There's the funeral service of the first prince to consider, the matter of the succession of the noblemen you purged, and a mountain of other issues that require your attention!"

"La la la! I can't hear you!"

"Wait!"

Having finished changing, the man took out a scroll and untied its cord.

"Any message I should pass on to your sister?" he asked.

"Are you seriously going to use such a precious scroll instead of simply taking a carriage...?" The civil official sighed before answering the man's question. "Yes, absolutely. Tell her to stop being so soft on you."

"Sure," the man replied with a shrug. "Bye, then! Gate!" he said, disappearing into a bright flash of light.

A magic circle drawn on the floor of a small, yet tidy room glowed. Out of thin air, a man with a horn, elf ears, a wolf tail, and other peculiar attributes appeared. A young girl, who'd been sitting in the room quietly reading, lifted her eyes from her book.

"Welcome back, president," she greeted him.

"Hiya, Oulu." Egret erased the magic circle on the floor, then flopped onto the couch of the fine hotel room he had booked in the empire.

"I see you still refuse to fix that casual attitude of yours. My brother will scold you, you know?"

“Speaking of your brother, he had a message for you. He said you should be softer on me.”

“Did you truly think I’d believe that?” Oulu asked, a frustrated sigh emanating from her mouth. The face she made when she was fed up with Egret was exactly the same as her brother’s.

“What’s this?” Egret asked, picking up a letter from a nearby desk.

Oulu answered before he could read the sender’s name. “It’s from Traitre’s chair, Miss Ellie.”

“Oho?” Egret happily grabbed a letter opener and sliced through the envelope. However, his smile fell when he saw the contents.

“Bad news?” Oulu asked. “And here I thought she’d written you a letter to invite you to enjoy the festival with her.”

“It’s not even a letter...” Egret said after a long pause. “It’s an order slip.”

“Ah,” Oulu said, looking at him as though he were the most pitiful man alive.

**

The sun had already set by the time I made it back home from visiting Count Guide and his son. On the way, I’d stopped by Egret’s hotel to deliver an additional order slip, but, unfortunately, he wasn’t there. It wasn’t too much of an issue, though. Oulu was there, so I’d given the slip to her instead.

Alice and the others had already returned home, and as soon as I stepped into the entrance, my daughter ran up to me. I handed my bag to Mireille and caught her just as she leaped into my arms.

“Mama! Welcome back!”

“Good evening, Alice. Did you have a nice day?”

“Yes! You know what, *you know what*? We saw a mister blow fire

from his mouth!”

“That sounds incredible! I wish I could have seen that with you.”

I carried Alice to the living room while she told me all about their outing. She’d seen street performers in Kellevan too, but as I expected, the performers who’d gathered in the capital for the festival were far more impressive. Apparently, the girls had even seen monster tamers and people who could cast illusion magic.

“And then I bought a gift for you, mama!”

“Oh my! You did?”

Alice handed me a small paper bag. “I picked it myself!” she said.

“Really? May I open it?”

“Yes!”

Inside the bag was a hairpin decorated with a small ornament shaped like an ice crystal. The materials weren’t valuable by any means, but the crystal was finely crafted. It was so well made, in fact, that I suspected it had been forged by a dwarf artisan.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you, Alice.”

I styled my hair with my hands and put on the hairpin.

“How does it look?” I asked Alice.

The little girl beamed. “It looks the best on you!”

I stroked Alice’s hair gently and she giggled.

“My, that hairpin suits you well, Miss Ellie,” said Mireille, who’d just entered the living room alongside Misha and Lunoa. Misha carried a tray with a tea set and cakes.

“Thank you, Mireille. And Lunoa and Misha, thank you for watching over Alice today. Did the two of you have fun as well?”

“We did! The festival has yet to start, but there were already so many stalls.”

“We got to see plenty of unusual goods.”

“That’s great,” I said. I suddenly noticed that the dagger hanging at Misha’s hip wasn’t the same as usual. “Did you purchase a new dagger today, Misha?”

“Ah, yes, I did. Miss Lunoa said it looked like a good item. Apparently, it’s a replica of the daggers that knights used in the days of the Old Kingdom.”

“May I see it?” I asked.

“Of course.”

Misha handed me the dagger in its scabbard. I unsheathed it and inspected it from the point to the hilt.

“This isn’t a replica,” I said. “This is a real magic dagger forged during the time of the Old Kingdom.”

“Huh?” Misha gasped.

“I imagine Lunoa told you that this was a good item based on the materials used to make it. However, her lack of knowledge prevented her from analyzing it entirely.”

“But not even the peddler mentioned it being magic. And we all agreed it didn’t look old enough to be anything but a replica.”

“The magic circle inside it must be damaged,” I surmised. “The weapon’s style is from the late Old Kingdom era. There would have been a preservation spell cast on the dagger, which explains why it

doesn't look like it was excavated from ruins, but it must not be active anymore."

"Is it very valuable?" Misha asked.

"These daggers were mass-produced to be used by knights, and quite a lot have resurfaced over the years, so they're not all that valuable, no. They still have a practical use, so I'd say the average price would be around eight gold coins."

"E-Eight gold coins?!" she blurted out.

"How much did you pay for it?"

"The merchant originally wanted two regular silvers and a small silver, but Miss Lunoa negotiated for me and I got it for one regular and nine small silvers."

"Then you made a great deal," I said, chuckling.

Lunoa was shocked to find out that what she thought was a replica was in fact a real antique, and she joined my laughter at the unexpected fortuitousness.

"But you said it's broken," Alice chimed in. "Can you fix it, mama?"

"Hm. Yes, I can probably fix it. Do you mind if I try, Misha?"

"Please go ahead—if it's not a bother, of course."

I summoned my Grimoire of Mammon and took out an enchantment tool. Alice watched me closely, her eyes sparkling with interest. As I started working on the dagger, I figured now was a good time to teach Lunoa about enchanting items.

"Do you know how to engrave magic circles on objects to turn them into magic items or magic weapons?" I asked.

"So, umm... You have to engrave the magic circle directly onto the material, right?" Lunoa hesitantly replied.

“That is the commonly used method nowadays,” I said. “The advantage is that it doesn’t require much technique aside from the ability to draw a proper magic circle, which makes it easy to efficiently mass-produce magic items. The drawback, however, is that even the smallest damage will disable the enchantment. That’s not necessarily a big issue when it comes to domestic items, but on the battlefield, it can cost one’s life. That is why people sometimes rely on an alternate method.”

I placed the dagger on a piece of fabric that could isolate magic in order to make my work easier. Then, I poured a potion over it. Suddenly, a magic circle rose into the air and floated in front of me.

“This process of enchanting objects is extremely complex to master, and few artisans still practice it,” I explained. “I can attempt to fix this circle, but I couldn’t enchant an item from scratch using this method.”

I scrutinized the floating magic circle and noticed that part of the outside circle was missing.

“Here’s the issue,” I said, pointing to the gap. “Thankfully, the missing part wasn’t a complicated motif from the inside of the circle. I can fix this in no time.”

I used a quill pen made from the feather of a bird monster, along with ink derived from crushed magic stones, to draw a new line and repair the circle before infusing magic into it.

“There you go, all fixed,” I said.

“Thank you, Miss Ellie. Come to think of it, I’ve yet to ask. What enchantment is that?” Misha said.

Oh, right, I realized. I hadn’t explained.

“These weapons used to be called guardian daggers. You can imbue them with one spell at a time. However, it is impossible to pick a unique spell like Lunoa’s Item Analysis, or a spell that can only be used by a specific race, such as Beastification for beastkin or Scale Armor for lizardmen. It’s also impossible to pick a spell

beyond intermediate level. As long as it meets the level requirement, though, the spell's attribute doesn't matter."

I reached out for the dagger in Misha's hands and activated Aqua Heal as I touched the ornament on the handle. It was a low-level water spell that could heal small wounds and detoxify.

"Unsheathe it and pour some mana into that ornament," I told her.

"O-Okay. Like this?" A drop of water radiating blue light emerged from the tip of the blade.

"You can activate the spell by pouring mana into the ornament like so," I explained. "Once you use the spell, it'll disappear, so be careful about that. Guardian daggers were created to be used by knights who lacked magical abilities. Unleashing the spell within the dagger only requires a tiny bit of mana, so practically anyone can do it. However, you do need to cast the spell properly to imbue it into the dagger."

Lunoa and Alice began playing around, taking turns storing simple spells in the dagger and unleashing them. As I watched them, Misha turned to me.

"Miss Ellie," she said, "Actually I... I meant to ask you something..."

"A request from you? How rare. What is it, Misha?"

"I'd like to participate in this." She handed me a piece of rough paper. It was an advertisement for an event.

"A martial arts tournament?"

"Yes... I was thinking I'd like to see what I can do, and test myself..."

"I'm not against you registering, but this tournament is popular. Powerful adventurers and mercenaries will take part because nobles keep an eye on it to scout new knights or members of their personal guards. Even current knights of the empire often compete. If you

don't mind me being blunt, I don't believe you're at the level necessary for a tournament like this one just yet."

"I'm aware of that fact. That's why instead of participating in the main tournament, I want to try this one: the pair tournament."

"The pair tournament?" I repeated, unfamiliar with such an event. I took a better look at the paper and noticed a small box in a corner mentioning a two-versus-two tournament.

"I don't believe I've ever heard of this one," I said.

"From what I've heard, this will be the first edition," Mireille said. "It will serve as a sort of opening act to the main tournament. Most of the truly strong fighters will want to show off their individual skills, so they'll only fight in the main tournament. In other words, the level of this one will likely be much lower."

Apparently, Mireille already knew about this pair-based competition.

"Why would they bother adding a new tournament now? Especially one with a lower level?" I wondered out loud.

"They say they wish to highlight cooperation, not only technique and strength," Mireille answered. "Or at least, that's the public reasoning. I suspect the true reason lies here." She pointed at a line on the paper.

"'Sponsor: Hokins Financial...'" I read. "I see, the Chief is involved."

"Up through the last festival, the empire itself organized and sponsored the tournament. But it appears that now Darc Hokins has taken over," said Mireille. "From what I know, the entry fees and ticket sales barely used to cover the costs of running the event. While the tournament allowed the government to look for strong fighters, it wasn't very cost-effective. Now that a private business is in charge, however, we can expect to see gambling flourish."

"And with a bookmaker running the event, it makes sense to maximize the number of fights," I concluded. "All the more

opportunities for people to gamble and fill the Chief's pockets. Anyhow, under these conditions, I don't see any reason to discourage you from participating, Misha. But who will you team up with?"

"Me. I'll fight with her."

"You too, Lunoa?"

"Yes. I've been fighting monsters as an adventurer on my days off, and I want to see how far I can go."

"Well, this is a good chance for you to accumulate experience fighting people instead of monsters. All right, I'll allow it. Just promise me one thing: Be careful not to injure yourselves too badly."

"Yes, Miss Ellie!" they exclaimed in unison.

**

"Hi, it's been a while."

The man who'd just spoken sank down onto the sofa in my drawing room. Behind him were his twin bodyguards from the Southern Kingdom. My guest was one of the members of the empire's Merchants' Guild Council and the man who ruled over the underworld—Darc Hokins.

"Far too long, indeed. What can I do for you today?"

"I wanted to have a chat with you," he started, "about the martial arts tournament." Darc took out a cigarette, but before lighting it he appeared to change his mind and put it back into his pocket.

"It will likely be pretty hot on the day of the tournament," he continued. "So I thought of selling refreshing drinks."

"A most natural idea for a merchant," I replied. "But I'm afraid I don't see how that thought led you to me."

“Oh, you know, I was thinking I could get you to make some ice for me.”

Ice? I could indeed create a large quantity of ice with my magic, but Darc could achieve the same result by hiring several ice mages, so why me? In the midst of my confusion, Darc started grinning.

“Obviously, I hired some ice mages, but I have another very important job for most of them—making sure the temperature remains cool enough around my VIPs. That means I likely won’t have enough ice to serve regular clients.”

“You came to me for *that*?”

“I had a feeling you’d accept my request.”

“And why are you so confident, may I ask?”

“Hey, young misses,” Darc called out, looking at Lunoa and Misha, who were standing behind me. “I hear you’re participating in my pair tournament.”

“Y-Y-Yes,” Lunoa stammered.

“We are,” Misha confirmed.

“In that case, you’re most definitely coming too, aren’t you?” Darc asked me.

“That is likely, indeed,” I answered.

“And you’ll be bringing your little brat along, correct?”

“Alice? She’s been looking forward to it, so yes.”

“Perfect. If you take on the job, I’ll reserve a box for your personal use during the tournament.”

“A box?” I repeated.

Boxes were usually reserved by nobles. They were entirely separated from the regular seating area, and they had comfortable

seats and roofs to protect their occupants from the sun. All in all, they made attending events held in arenas, theaters, and other such venues far more pleasant.

“I recently sent an inquiry and was told the boxes were sold out,” I said.

“I’m the organizer,” Darc said. “As you can imagine, I kept a few empty, just in case. I’ll give you one of those.”

“I see…”

Frankly, making ice wouldn’t be all that tiring for me. If doing so meant I could provide Alice with a good viewing experience, it was worth it.

“All right,” I said. “I shall accept your offer.”

“Great. I’ll send one of my subordinates to you tomorrow to explain the details.”

I felt as though Darc had me in the palm of his hand, and I didn’t quite appreciate that, but I nodded anyway.

“Speaking of which,” I started, “there will likely be quite a bit of waiting time in between the matches, right?”

“Huh? Well, yeah, I suppose so.”

“How about hiring singers, minstrels, and the like to perform and fill the gaps, then?”

Darc hummed in thought and his smile broadened. He’d understood my point.

“Keep everyone’s eyes on the show even during breaks so they stay in their seats and purchase *more* drinks and food from me, huh?”

“Sounds more profitable than just selling during the matches, right?”

“That’s a great idea,” Darc agreed. He turned to one of his bodyguards and told them, “Go make arrangements for that!”

I smiled at him. “I’m fine with three percent.”

“What?”

“Three percent of your profit. That’s the price of that idea.”

“I bet you’ve been told many times that you’re an incredibly sore loser.”

“Never,” I shot back. And it was true.

**

The space within the imperial palace allocated to the Haldorian delegation was large enough for every member to have a private chamber, and it also included offices, conference rooms, a private courtyard, and a small reception hall. In the days that preceded the festival, the delegation’s schedule was packed with meetings and formal talks with the imperial government. Before they tackled these responsibilities, the leader and vice-leader of the delegation, Eiwass and Roselia, had gathered the key members for one last meeting in order to assign tasks.

“Lord Lyman, you will meet with the minister of foreign affairs, Lord Dorham. As for you, Vice-minister Haizen, you shall go observe the Citizens’ Assembly’s reunion,” said Roselia, who was chairing the meeting.

“Understood.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“After our luncheon with Prince Okyst, Lord Eiwass and I will meet with the minister of war, Lord Tiggar, so we can discuss ending the conflict between our two nations. I doubt we’ll resolve the issue entirely, but it appears everyone desires an extension of the armistice, so there is no cause for worry at this juncture.”

The members of the delegation nodded as Roselia spoke. They’d

all been handpicked by Adel and were already on her side. Needless to say, Adel had chosen competent people who were in favor of a lasting peace and did not loathe the empire.

“We will all be very busy until the celebrations start, but I urge you to do your best in the coming days. Thank you,” Roselia concluded.

Once the festival commenced, the emperor and the important nobles would have other obligations. For that reason, all of the delegation’s commitments had to be crammed into the short period of time before the festival.

Once the other members of the delegation had all exited the room, Eiwass spoke up.

“Lady Roselia, I have a request for you.”

“What?! My schedule is beyond packed. You know that, don’t you?”

The kingdom was known to be very conservative, and a young woman like Roselia being appointed vice-leader of the delegation had naturally attracted a lot of attention. As a result, in addition to her meetings with the government officials of the empire, Roselia had received countless invitations from noble ladies to attend tea parties and other gatherings.

Roselia did not enjoy being a socialite in the slightest, but before they’d departed Adel had asked her to accept as many of these invitations as possible. She wanted Roselia to help undo the current image of the kingdom: a male-dominated, human-supremacist nation with outdated values. For that same reason, Adel had made sure that the delegation itself was diverse and included people of many different races. Suffice it to say, Roselia barely had even a moment to breathe until the festival.

“Whatever this is about, can you not do it yourself?” Roselia asked.

Eiwass wasn’t as busy as she was. As the leader of the delegation,

his schedule had to remain light enough for him to be able to react to emergencies—Eiwass himself had insisted on it. Roselia wasn't happy with that outcome, but she understood his reasoning and had accepted it.

"I'm afraid not," Eiwass said. "You're the only one I can ask. Besides, I need you *during* the festival, not before. So it shouldn't affect your schedule in any way." Eiwass took out a neatly folded piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to Roselia.

"What is this?" Roselia asked as she opened it.

"I want you to take part," Eiwass stated once she'd finished reading.

"What?! Why must I do that?!"

"According to the intelligence I've gathered, Elizabeth will make an appearance there."

"Elizabeth?!"

"As you know, my attempt to talk to her failed. I want you to take this chance to approach her yourself," Eiwass said, his expression unusually serious.

Roselia couldn't hide her displeasure, but she knew she had to accept.

"All right, I understand," she replied.

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On the following day, I entered my drawing room once again, this time to see a different guest. Egret was lounging leisurely on the sofa, sipping a cup of black tea.

"I'm sorry for the wait," I told him.

"No, no, please don't apologize. I got to enjoy this fine tea, so I wasn't bored in the slightest."

Egret wasn't here to visit me as a friend. He'd come to personally deliver the products I'd ordered from the Birch Commercial Firm.

"So, where are the goods?"

"Right here," Egret replied, taking out three rolled-up parchments tied with leather straps.

"I placed an order because you said you might be able to procure some for me, but I definitely did not expect three," I said.

"I'm sorry, I know the order slip said five, but I couldn't get my hands on that many at once. You'll have to wait a bit for the last two."

"That's more than enough," I replied. I untied the leather straps and examined the parchments. "They're genuine Gate scrolls," I continued. "Here is the money."

I put down two small bags brimming with gold coins on the table in front of Egret. Gate scrolls were incredibly scarce, so they were naturally very expensive. Still, they were well worth the money. One of these could get you out of a dangerous situation in the blink of an eye, which made them a very reassuring item to own. In fact, I was thinking of having Alice hold on to one of them, just in case. While I pondered what to do with these three scrolls, Egret finished counting the coins.

"All good," he said. "Oh, and Oulu will deliver the goods you requested with that additional order slip at a later date."

"Those are for my firm, so if she could get in touch directly with the person in charge of accepting deliveries, that would be perfect," I said.

"Sure thing."

The additional order was for cactuses from the Nile Kingdom. I'd heard that Egret was having a shipment come in from his homeland, so I'd asked for them to be added in at the last minute. These cactuses, which only grew in the Nile Kingdom, had wonderful properties and could be used as an ingredient in potions

and cosmetics. I was looking forward to having my research team take a look at them.

After the conclusion of our business talks, the topic shifted to the festival. Apparently, Egret would be going back to his home country for a while after the celebrations.

“Oh, right, I meant to ask,” Egret said. “Would you like to walk around the festival with me?”

“Let me see... I could make time for it on the second day of the festival, after the pair tournament.”

“It’s settled, then! Speaking of which, why the pair tournament and not the main one?”

“Misha and Lunoa will be fighting in that one,” I replied. “Well, if they get through the qualifiers, that is.”

“Oh, interesting,” Egret said. He reached for the teapot and poured himself another cup.

Egret seemed to want to take advantage of the festival to make contact with as many peddlers as possible. Since his base of operations was not located in the capital, building connections with vendors who traveled a lot made more sense than trying to get close to the nobles and merchants who conducted business solely in the capital.

“By the way, what will you do with Alice during the tournament? Won’t the crowd be too much for her?”

“I made a deal with the organizer, Mr. Hokins. I got a private box out of it, so she should be fine.”

Alice would be able to sit comfortably, protected from the harsh rays of the sun. I’d had to accept Hokins’s conditions, but getting a box in exchange—which was incredibly expensive and oftentimes reserved for nobles—had been a big plus.

“I see someone splurged,” Egret joked.

“Let’s say that,” I replied. I flashed him an awkward smile before gulping down some tea.

**

The first day of the festival finally rolled around. It was still only the morning, but the entire city was already buzzing with excitement. The dazzling carriages that made up the imperial procession paraded along the main avenue, escorted by the elite knights of the imperial guard. Today, the gate that led to the noble district was open, and commoners had been allowed in to watch the procession, though they were restricted to a designated area. We’d just arrived to take a look as well, though we stood in an area reserved for lower nobles and commoners with special permission.

“Look! The horsies are wearing armor!” Alice exclaimed excitedly.

“Oops, careful, little missy! You’re gonna fall!” warned Barl, who was carrying her on his shoulders so she could see better.

The little girl couldn’t stop wiggling around, pointing at the knights in full armor and their trusty steeds. Lunoa and Misha weren’t with us, as they wanted to work on their coordination before the qualifiers for the pair tournament. I stopped next to Barl and looked where Alice was gesturing.

“It is quite the sight, indeed,” I commented.

The knights in polished armor marched in perfect unison, their capes fluttering in the wind.

“Oh? You think so too, missy?” Barl asked.

“I do. It feels novel, seeing it all from the viewpoint of the citizens. I used to be on the other side, waving my hand from inside the carriage. It may not look like much, but smiling and waving for hours is quite tiresome.”

“Such hardship,” Barl teased. “Look, here comes the star of the show.”

Just as Barl had said, a noticeably more opulent carriage was approaching. The knights escorting that particular coach were not clad in lavish ceremonial armor, like the others, but in proper battle gear. There was no mistaking it—this was the carriage of the ruler of the Yutear Empire: Godwin Yutear.

"As expected, he has the cream of the crop around him," I said.

The imperial carriage had no roof. In fact, the vehicle was closer to being a chariot than a real carriage. Godwin stood there in all his majesty, hand raised to salute his people. My eyes, however, were not drawn to Godwin himself, but to the knight riding as close to the carriage as he possibly could. Barl had noticed him too, and his eyes were glued onto the knight, analyzing his demeanor and his every motion.

"So that's the best knight in the empire," Barl said. "The grand master of the Imperial Knights, Mathias Rhodostos, the Imperial Blade."

"In the flesh. On the battlefield, Lord Rhodostos was on par with Bulat, the God of Thunder. The emperor himself bestowed his nickname of the Imperial Blade. He's the empire's greatest hero. So tell me, Barl, could you beat him?"

"No way. The best I could do is slow him down. And that's assuming I risk my life doing it. I can't see myself winning against him. If he were an adventurer he'd be Rank S—a monster beyond compare."

At his best, Barl was probably as strong as the most powerful Rank A adventurers—around Yuu or Elsa's level, I expected. And yet, he'd barely be able to slow that man down.

"Barl, in your eyes, how strong am I?" I asked.

"Lemme think... Probably somewhere in the middle of Rank A. Your Divine Artifact has a wide range of uses, and you probably still have a few trump cards that not even I know about, but you're no true fighter. I hate to break it to you, but I sure hope you weren't thinking of fighting Bulat head-on."

“I wasn’t.”

A Rank S...

Such individuals far transcended the realm of ordinary people and were said to be able to face entire armies alone. At the moment, there were only three Rank S adventurers: Amadeus Schikaneder, the Magic Flute, Koujirou Sasaki, the Blade God, and Flanriet Mather, the Army of One. In addition to them, there were four people who were not adventurers but were said to be on the same level. Among them were Mathias and Bulat. I had no intention of fighting Mathias, but Bulat was one of the targets of my revenge. I knew full well that Barl was right. I had no chance of winning if I fought him directly. To improve my odds, I’d need to make thorough preparations...

“Mama, what are you two talking about?”

“Ah, don’t worry about it, Alice. It’s nothing.”

Alice’s voice pulled me out of my rumination, and I refocused my attention on the parade.

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